

CALIFORNIA PERFORMANCE REVIEW COMMISSION

LOS ANGELES

SEPTEMBER 9, 2004

Introduction

Good morning. My name is Dave Gordon, and since July 6 I have served as the Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools. Previously, I served as Superintendent of the Elk Grove Unified School District, a highly diverse district which grew from about 30,000 to 58,000 students during my tenure there. Imagine my surprise when, on my fifth day on my new job, a television reporter I knew called and asked to interview me about how I felt about the recommendation to eliminate most of California's County School Offices. The next call was from my wife, who said, "We're locking down the family budget until we're sure you'll be employed. Turn in your credit card when you get home tonight."

Seriously though, I am here this morning to tell the story of how County Offices provide leadership and support to districts and schools in the areas of academic assistance and fiscal accountability, and direct services to tens of thousands of the state's most vulnerable children. I place the emphasis on leadership and service, because in this vast and diverse state, just 58 County Offices respond to an endless array of needs with diligence and imagination.

Size and Diversity of California

Let's begin by reviewing how massive the scope of K-12 education in California really is. Last school year, 2003-04, we served about 6,300,000 students. This is more than the entire population of 37 of our fifty states. Ours is also one of the most diverse states in terms of the need for services to special education students, troubled and incarcerated youth, and English language learners. More than 100 languages are spoken in some of our larger school districts. In my former district our families spoke 85 languages.

California is also extraordinarily diverse in its mix of rural, suburban and urban settings, and this is reflected in the makeup of our public school districts. In 2002-03 we had 1056 districts including the County Offices. Only 22 of these districts had enrollments over 35,000. This year my former district, at 58,000 students, was the eighth largest in the state. If you've driven I-5 from Los Angeles to Sacramento, undoubtedly you've passed Los Banos in Merced County. That district, at 7800 students, is the 200th largest in California. Its entire population would have filled only about 2½ of the six high schools in my former district. And think about it—with over 1000 districts total, there are more than 800 districts that are even smaller than Los Banos, including Coffee Creek Elementary in Trinity County and Bogus Elementary in Siskiyou County, each at 13 students, and Kashia Elementary in Sonoma County with just 9 students.

Types of County Services

County Office services fall roughly into three categories: direct student services, sometimes coupled with direct financial services; technical assistance and professional development for districts and schools in areas such as finance, curriculum, and teacher and administrator support; and financial and program oversight.

Direct Services. County Offices provide direct services to many of California's highest risk children. Annually, County Offices serve nearly 50,000 severely disabled students. It would be impossible for small districts to serve these students by themselves (one or two per district) and often inefficient for even large districts to serve them on their own. Students served run the gamut from seriously emotionally disturbed to multiple physically handicapped to autistic, and County staff are working hard with universities and private agencies to find even better models of service for these children.

Each year about 125,000 court, community and community day school students are served by County Offices. Many of these students are in jail, for stints ranging from three weeks to several years. Some are adrift in the foster care system. Some have been expelled from regular schools. But whatever their individual circumstances, all these children are in some way wards of the County Courts or County Children's Services systems, making the linkage between county government and the county superintendent a very helpful connection to better serve children. Imagine if, in our ten-county Sacramento-based service region, Dave Gordon called the Juvenile Court Judge in Yuba County. He would likely say, "Dave who?"—and move on down the docket.

Technical Assistance and Professional Development. Our mission in education in California these days is to teach towards high academic standards, and ensure that students make continuous progress so that they are well prepared for college and careers. County Offices support districts, schools, teachers and administrators through curriculum and professional development, principal training, and intervention teams to assist low performing schools, to name just a few services. Sacramento County has provided teacher training in reading across the state, training thousands of teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District alone.

Led by their forward-thinking Association (CCSESA), County Superintendents have devised a Regional System of School and District Support (S4 Network) which works closely with the Governor, Legislature, California State Superintendent and Department of Education to help implement state initiatives and assist in turning around underperforming schools. County Offices are also spearheading efforts to help local communities upgrade and expand preschool and other early childhood programs. These programs help give young children a good start in school, and they have a strong "return on investment" in the form of better student performance in later elementary grades. County Offices are in the forefront of high school reform, helping districts prepare students for careers through an extensive network of Regional Occupational Programs. And counties help push for badly-needed programs in the arts, music, ethics and civic values education, sportsmanship and other areas districts often do not have time or money to invest in.

Financial and Program Oversight. The state has increasingly turned to County Offices to provide fiscal and program oversight. After all, the fiscal solvency of districts is an

overriding priority. School and classroom programs can't and won't improve if a district can't even pay its bills. Counties, and their Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT), have won praise for their honest evaluations of district finances and their recommendations for improvement. For example, as we meet today, the Fresno County Office of Education and FCMAT are hard at work helping the Fresno Unified School District turn around a major financial shortfall.

On June 21, 2004, Assembly Bill 2756 (Dauscher) was signed by the Governor to strengthen County Offices' fiscal oversight of school districts. County Offices are now assuming full responsibility for the \$21 million Digital California Project linking over 6,000 schools to the internet. Without strong County leadership many of our schools wouldn't be linked to the Internet at all—a sorry statement in the nation's most sophisticated technology economy.

On the program oversight side, many counties have mounted School Assistance and Intervention (SAIT) “turnaround teams” to help low-performing schools improve student performance. These teams, combined with the strong County Office professional development services, have helped many schools make dramatic improvements. One recent example is Galt High School in the Sacramento region. Galt gained well deserved recognition this past week for making a gain of more than 70 points on its Academic Performance Index (API) with the help of a County Office team.

And just last week the Legislature put its trust in County Offices to oversee an agreement reached by the Governor to settle the long-disputed “Williams” lawsuit over the adequacy of books, materials, teachers and facilities in our state's neediest schools. The four-bill legislative package vests responsibility with County Superintendents for visiting nearly 2300 schools annually to ensure that minimum standards are met in the areas outlined above.

But the bottom line is that in education in California in 2004, the minimum is not nearly good enough. If I said to any of you that your goal should be that your child or grandchild should reach “the minimum,” you would say, “No way, that's not nearly good enough.” And so would I. And that is why the “Williams” settlement is just a beginning for many of our schools. And that is why school districts and County Offices must partner to serve . . . and lead . . . and push . . . and not be satisfied . . . until every one of our students can reach the highest possible standards.

Recommendation: Foster Regionalization Within the Current Structure

The CPR report suggests moving towards a regional approach. This is a good idea, and CCESSA has been working to install it through 11 County regions. But right now 58 County Superintendents are leading—with vitality and imagination—to push the system towards excellence.

For example, in our ten-County region around Sacramento—and I'm going to call only a few names, not because they are unique, but because in just two months on the job I have already come to know their work—they are doing extraordinary things. In Nevada County Terry McAteer has taken over responsibility for local public television, and is a strong proponent for the arts. In Yolo County Jorge Ayala secured a million-plus grant to

push the teaching of American History. In Yuba County Ric Teagarden goes on the television airwaves each week to encourage parent involvement and to help children with their homework. And in El Dorado County Dr. Vicki Barber has become an expert in Charter Schools and helps the entire state give charters a fair shake in getting started.

I would encourage the Commission to look at the ways County Offices are providing leadership and service today, and to amend your recommendations to foster further regionalization within the current structure. The fact is, the current County Superintendents are close to the customer, and the customers like their hands-on relationship with their local elected officials. And regional offices would need field offices anyway, given the vastness and geographic diversity of our state.

Based on my 31 years of experience in California at the state, district and now—for two months—at the County level, I believe this can be done, and done well. As I told the reporter who called me in July, I wouldn't have taken this job if I hadn't envisioned a dramatically increasing role of leadership and service for County Superintendents. I'd encourage any of you to visit me in Sacramento, or any of our other county Offices, and see for yourselves. Thank you for your time, and I'd be happy to answer any questions.